

How to use Explore

In this issue

The 92 daily readings in this issue of *Explore* are designed to help you understand and apply the Bible as you read it each day.

It's serious!

We suggest that you allow 15 minutes each day to work through the Bible passage with the notes. It should be a meal, not a snack! Readings from other parts of the Bible can throw valuable light on the study passage. These cross-references can be skipped if you are already feeling full up, but will expand your grasp of the Bible. *Explore* uses the NIV2011 Bible translation, but you can also use it with the NIV1984 or ESV translations.

Sometimes a prayer box will encourage you to stop and pray through the lessons—but it is always important to allow time to pray for God's Spirit to bring his word to life, and to shape the way we think and live through it.

We're serious!

All of us who work on *Explore* share a passion for getting the Bible into people's lives. We fiercely hold to the Bible as God's word—to honour and follow, not to explain away.

1
Find a time you can read the Bible each day

2
Find a place where you can be quiet and think

3
Ask God to help you understand

4
Carefully read through the Bible passage for today

5
Study the verses with *Explore*, taking time to think

6
Pray about what you have read

the goodbook
COMPANY

Opening up the Bible

Welcome to *Explore*

Being a Christian isn't a skill you learn, like carpentry or flower arranging. Nor is it a lifestyle choice, like the kind of clothes you wear, or the people you choose to hang out with. It's about having a real relationship with the living God through his Son, Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that this relationship is like a marriage.

It's important to start with this, because many Christians view the practice of daily Bible-reading as a Christian duty, or a hard discipline that is just one more thing to get done in our busy modern lives.

But the Bible is God speaking to us: opening his mind to us on how he thinks, what he wants for us and what his plans are for the world. And most importantly, it tells us what he has done for us in sending his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. It's the way the Spirit shows Jesus to us, and changes us as we behold his glory.

The Bible is not a manual. It's a love letter. And as with any love letter, we'll want to treasure it, and make time to read and re-read it, so we know we are loved, and discover how we can please the One who loves us. Here are a few suggestions for making your daily time with God more of a joy than a burden:

☛ *Time*: Find a time when you will not be disturbed, and when the cobwebs are cleared from your mind. Many people have found that the morning is the best time as it sets you up for the day. If you're not a "morning person", then last thing

at night or a mid-morning break might suit you. Whatever works for you is right for you.

☛ *Place*: Jesus says that we are not to make a great show of our religion (*see Matthew 6:5-6*), but rather, to pray with the door to our room shut. Some people plan to get to work a few minutes earlier and get their Bible out in an office or some other quiet corner.

☛ *Prayer*: Although *Explore* helps with specific prayer ideas from the passage, try to develop your own lists to pray through. Use the flap inside the back cover to help with this. And allow what you read in the Scriptures to shape what you pray for yourself, the world and others.

☛ *Share*: As the saying goes: *expression deepens impression*. So try to cultivate the habit of sharing with others what you have learned. Why not join our Facebook group to share your encouragements, questions and prayer requests? Search for *Explore: For your daily walk with God*.

And remember, *it's quality, not quantity, that counts*: better to think briefly about a single verse than to skim through pages without absorbing anything, because it's about developing your relationship with the living God. The sign that your daily time with God is real is when you start to love him more and serve him more wholeheartedly.

Tim Thornborough and Carl Laferton
Editors



DANIEL: Faithful in exile

Welcome to Daniel. It's around 605 BC, and God's people are living in exile away from God's land, in the heart of a powerful and prosperous pagan empire: Babylon.

But why? What went so wrong that the Israelites would end up here?

Read Daniel 1:1-2

- 🔍 Look at where Nebuchadnezzar puts the articles from the temple of God (v 2). What answer would he give to the question “why”, do you think?
- 🔍 Look at the crucial detail we get at the start of verse 2. How does that explain what is really going on?

TIME OUT

2 Kings 24 – 25 describes a series of invasions by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar during the reigns of three kings of Judah, of which Jehoiakim is the first. Each defeat proves worse than the one before, until Jerusalem is finally overthrown (around 20 years after Daniel 1:1).

- 🔍 Read 2 Kings 24:1-4. How does this answer the question, “why?”

Meet the cast

Read Daniel 1:3-7

- 🔍 In what sense is this a good gig for Daniel & Co?
- 🔍 What are the (serious) downsides?

If Israel's god is the one true God, then right now it really doesn't look like it. His treasures are in the storehouses of the Babylonian gods. His people have lost the land he gave them and the freedom he won

for them. And now they're compelled to live and work in Babylon.

They even lose their names (v 7). Daniel's Hebrew name means “God is my judge”. But his new name Belteshazzar declares that “Bel (a Babylonian god) protects my life”. Similarly, Azariah (“he the Lord helps”) becomes Abednego (“servant of Nebo”, another Babylonian deity). Israel has lost—and their God has lost too. Or so it seems...

But as this book develops, the truth of God's sovereignty over all things, that is stated so simply in verse 2, will be dramatically revealed and illustrated through miraculous rescues, reversals of fortune, and terrifying visions of the future. The lives of rulers and nations, and every individual within them, are in the Lord's hands.

Daniel was probably written fairly soon after the end of exile (in around 539 BC). But life wasn't easy for those who returned to the land—in many ways it still looked like they were the losers. The book of Daniel was intended to help them to learn the lessons of the past, and to stay faithful in the future as they rebuilt Jerusalem.

Pray

When do you think it looks as if God is “losing”? Talk to God about it now. Rejoice that however it looks, God is not losing. Pray that reading Daniel will increase your confidence in his loving, fatherly rule.



Going vegan

Yesterday we met four teenagers from among the Israelite captives: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.

Fortunately for them, they're not stuck making bricks on a Babylonian building project. Instead, they've been put on a cushy cultural training programme, complete with lavish rations from the king's table. Cue a plot twist that hinges on a three-letter word ... *but*.

Read Daniel 1:8-17

- ❓ *What does Daniel "resolve" in verse 8? What does he do about it? (v 9, 11-14)*
- ❓ *What does God do for Daniel (v 9, 17)?*

What was it about the king's food and drink that would have "defiled" Daniel? We can't be sure. It's possible that it was because it would have violated the food laws laid down in Leviticus (e.g. Leviticus 3:17, 11:47), or because it was sacrificed to pagan gods.

Whatever the reason, it's clear that Daniel's priority isn't keeping his head down for an easy life. Nor is it maximising the "strategic" opportunities of being trained for the Babylonian court. His priority is staying faithful to his God. And his resolve is firm: when the chief official proves sympathetic but reluctant (Daniel 1:9-10), Daniel finds another way (v 11-13).

Highs and lows

Three years of vegetables later (see v 5)...

Read Daniel 1:18-21

- ❓ *How does the writer emphasise the exceptional abilities of these young men (v 19-20)? What's their secret (v 17)?*

These four young captives are honoured as the best in the business. This is a pattern we'll see a lot of in Daniel: the low are raised up, and the high are brought low.

Apply

- ❓ *Do you share Daniel's resolve to live a life of counter-cultural obedience and purity? In what specific areas does your resolve feel weak?*
- ❓ *What elements of your environment/circumstances pose a threat to your resolve?*

Two phrases in Daniel 1 will sharpen our resolve: "God had caused..." (v 9), "God gave..." (v 17). God equips us for obedience, and he rewards our obedience. He works in our circumstances to always provide a way out of temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13); and he gives us his Spirit to empower us to say "no" to temptation (Galatians 5:16-26). And he promises that living his way will *always* result in blessing, either in this life or the next (Luke 11:28, 12:35-38). (Although that doesn't mean everything will always go well with us, as we'll see in Daniel chapter 3.)

- ❓ *God has promised to equip us and reward us for our obedience. How does this spur you on to live a holy life?*



Prayers in a crisis

How do you respond in a crisis? This passage invites us to compare how two very different men react under pressure.

It's worth noting that 2:4 – 7:28 are written in Aramaic (the most universally understood language of the ancient world) as opposed to Hebrew. These central chapters contain a message that is for all nations.

Read Daniel 2:1-13

- ❓ *Why is this king—the most powerful man in the ancient world—so troubled?*
- ❓ *Look at the way the writer has chosen to describe this back-and-forth dialogue between the king and his astrologers.*
 - *What words and ideas are repeated?*
 - *How does the way the story is told keep raising the tension?*
- ❓ *What have the astrologers got right in their frustrated outburst in verses 10-11?*
- ❓ *How would you describe the king's response in verses 12-13?*

Read Daniel 2:14-19

- ❓ *How would you describe Daniel's response in these verses?*
- ❓ *How does that compare with Nebuchadnezzar's?*

We've already been told in 1:17 that Daniel has the God-given ability to interpret dreams and visions. So when he hears about the drama in the palace, he acts *prudently* (in his delicate words to Arioch), *confidently* (in approaching the king), *humbly* (in seeking the help of others), and *prayerfully* (in pleading for mercy from God). It's clear that those things are not mutually exclusive!

Apply

Think about a time recently when you were facing either a crisis, something unknown or had just received bad news.

- ❓ *Which of those four marks of Daniel's response could have been said of your reaction (prudent, confident, humble, prayerful)? Which less so?*
- ❓ *How would a more Daniel-like response have looked?*

“There is no one on earth who can do what the king asks” (v 10). But there is a God in heaven who can. “The gods ... do not live among humans” (v 11). But our God does. The Babylonian gods may have been distant, but the LORD is at work in his world—revealing himself, speaking to his people, and showing mercy. He did this ultimately by becoming human: “He has spoken to us by his Son ... [who is] the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being” (Hebrews 1:2-3). We don't need to panic or grope in the darkness. God has made himself known. If, like Daniel, we know we have a God in heaven who is at work in the world, then this will lead us to pray, and to act with prayerful confidence.

Pray

You have a God in heaven who is at work in the world. What do you need to talk to him about today?



Revelation and praise

Nebuchadnezzar wants his wise men to tell him his dream and interpret it. If Daniel doesn't come up with an answer soon, he'll be cut into pieces! No sweat...

Read Daniel 2:19-23

- ❓ *How does Daniel arrive at an understanding of the king's dream (v 19, 23)?*
- ❓ *What does he immediately do next (v 19)?*

Today we're going to hit pause on the narrative and spend some time praising God with Daniel. You might find it helpful to jot down your answers to the following questions on a piece of paper; then at the end of the study, you can turn your notes into your own song of praise. Optional New Testament references are listed to further stimulate your worship.

He changes

Read Daniel 2:21a; Romans 13:1

- ❓ *How have you seen the "times and seasons" change around you lately? God did it!*
- ❓ *Who is in authority over you? God put them there!*

He gives

Read Daniel 2:21b; James 1:5

- ❓ *Who do you admire for their wisdom and discernment? God gave it to them!*

He reveals

Read Daniel 2:22; 1 John 1:5-7

- ❓ *What dark thoughts are you ashamed of? God knows them!*
- ❓ *What dark or unknown things are you afraid of? God overrules them!*

Thanks and praise

Read Daniel 2:23; 1 John 5:14-15

God is the source and holder of all wisdom and power (Daniel 2:20); yet he freely gives wisdom and power to his servants (v 23).

- ❓ *What has God "made known" to you through his word in the last few weeks or months? Are there particular things he has been teaching you?*
- ❓ *List some specific ways in which God has given you "what [you] asked of him" in answer to your prayers.*

Pray

Read through verses 20-23 again, making them your own prayer of praise; at the end of each line, turn your answers to today's questions into words of worship and thanksgiving. Do this out loud if possible!



My God, my God, why...

Psalm 22 is an extreme psalm. It begins with almost unimaginable depths of suffering and concludes with an astonishing hymn of worldwide praise.

Why forsaken?

The first part of the psalm is frightening in the intensity of its suffering. By the Spirit, David voiced words that would be fulfilled centuries later. This means that as we read this song, we should be thinking not only of David's suffering but of Jesus' too.

Read Psalm 22:1-31

- ❓ *How does the king describe his sufferings?*
- ❓ *What does he cry out in prayer?*
- ❓ *What does he say about God's trustworthiness?*

We do not know what suffering in David's life drew out of him this astonishing cry of pain. He begins with an outburst to God as he experiences desperate suffering (v 1-2). He feels deeply the agonising distance from the Father ("so far ... so far") and the terrifying silence of heaven ("you do not answer"). The covenant God, who never, ever forsakes his people (for that is the definition of covenant faithfulness) has "forsaken" him. He cannot rest, although God seems to have no difficulty resting in silent distance.

- ❓ *In verse 11 David cries out, "Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help". In what way is trouble near in verses 6-8 and 12-18?*
- ❓ *How do verses 19-21 show that David is still trusting in God, even though trouble is so near?*

We need to feel the viscerally terrifying predicament of the king, so that when we hear the Lord Jesus cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" from the cross, we have some sense of what he was enduring for his people—for us.

Pray

Read Mark 15:33-34

Whatever King David may have experienced, the psalm's words reached their fulfilment at the cross of Christ. No historian's physical description of Roman crucifixion comes close to the power of this Psalm 22 poetry in helping us to feel the terror, agony and shame of what our King suffered for his people. Stop now to praise and thank Christ for taking on such suffering for us.

Apply

Read Romans 8:16-17

All of us, if we are followers of Jesus, are called to share in his sufferings (v 17).

- ❓ *Do you fear suffering for your faith?*
- ❓ *Have you experienced suffering in the past or are you expecting it to come in the future? Bring your fears and your pain to Christ, who understands.*

Weird dreams

Ever had a weird dream that made you afraid? We're about to listen in on Nebuchadnezzar's...

Read Daniel 2:24-30

We'll return to these verses tomorrow. Today we will focus on the content of the dream itself, which reveals “what will happen in days to come”. Try to really imagine what you're reading—draw some pictures if it helps!

Read Daniel 2:31-43

- ❓ *What's impressive about this statue (v 31)? What ultimately happens to it (v 34-35)?*
- ❓ *What is impressive about Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom (v 37-38)?*
- ❓ *What ultimately will happen to it (along with all the others that follow)?*

The four kingdoms represented by the four parts of the statue are generally accepted to be the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek and Roman empires. It's hard to underestimate the splendour of the Babylonian empire at this stage of history. Nebuchadnezzar stands at the head of a kingdom that was both militarily dominant and culturally magnificent. And yet he is told that “after you...”, someone else will come. His kingdom and those that follow will eventually be “swept ... away without leaving a trace” (v 35).

▼ Apply

What are some of the things in the world around you that look powerful and permanent? There will be a time “after them”. Just as there will be a time “after you”. Whatever it is that you pour your effort into building—a career, a home, or even a minis-

try—one day another person will sit at your desk, another family will live in your house, another person will lead your group. This truth should humble us. Even good things aren't permanent. Except, that is, for one...

The living stone

Read Daniel 2:44-45

- ❓ *In what ways is this final kingdom different to the others?*

Gold, bronze, iron or clay... it doesn't matter. There are really only two categories: things that will *end*, and the thing that will *endure* for ever—Christ's kingdom. There will never be a time “after him”; there will only and ever be him. These verses began to be fulfilled at the cross; and will be fully realised when Christ returns. He is the living Stone. And wonderfully, “the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame” or destroyed (1 Peter 2:4, 6). What we build on this foundation will endure (1 Corinthians 3:11-14).

▼ Apply

- ❓ *What would change about what you do today, and how you do it, if you...*
 - remembered that “after you” will come someone else?
 - remembered that what you do for Christ's kingdom will endure?
- ❓ *How would that change the way you think about the rich/powerful/successful people you know?*



Rise and fall...

Daniel has just told the most powerful man in the world that one day his kingdom will be destroyed, and succeeded by a kingdom set up by the “God of heaven” himself.

❓ *How do you think he'll respond?*

Before we find out, let's rewind the narrative to re-live the moments before the dream was revealed.

Mystery solved

Read Daniel 2:24-30; Daniel 2:46-49

- ❓ *Where did Daniel get the interpretation of the dream from (v 28, 30, 47)?*
- ❓ *Why has this mystery been revealed to Nebuchadnezzar (v 30)?*
- ❓ *How does this show God's kindness, do you think?*
- ❓ *How would you describe Nebuchadnezzar's response to this revelation?*
- ❓ *What is satisfying about how things end for Daniel and his friends?*

Clearly, the theme of God revealing mysteries is significant in this chapter. Look at how many times it comes up: verses 22, 28, 29, 30, 47!

And here's why this is important. The only way we can hope to know *anything* about who God is—or get answers to any of our big questions about who we are and why we're here and what the world is for—is if God tells us. If we were left to our own devices, we'd be scrabbling around in the dark: confused and afraid. But God speaks. He reveals mysteries; he reveals himself. He gives a personal revelation to a pagan king. How kind; how glorious!

But in the New Testament, God goes one better. It's interesting that, in the Gospels, Jesus never receives or interprets dreams, when this is something we see so much of in the Old Testament. But this makes perfect sense: Jesus doesn't need to interpret God's revelation, because he *is* God's revelation. Read Hebrews 1:1-3. So as New Testament believers, we stand in a position more privileged than Nebuchadnezzar or Daniel. Because we see much more than a dream of a rock; we see The Rock himself.

“No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son ... has made him known” (John 1:18). God speaks in order to save—by his Son, through his word. Paul speaks of God's salvation plan of the cross as “God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began” (1 Corinthians 2:7). The world around us won't get it, but “these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:10).

Pray

Like Nebuchadnezzar, we should be flat on our faces in awe. Not praising the human messenger, but praising the “God of gods and the Lord of kings” who would reveal himself to us.

❓ *Why not do that now?*



Odd one out

Ever had the experience of trying to walk when a crowd is pushing past you the opposite way? Does your faith ever make you feel like the odd one out?

Read Daniel 3:1-7

- ❓ *What details are we given that show the super-sized scale of this event?*

The statue is around 27m tall (about the height of six double decker buses!)—probably an image of the Babylonian god Nebu, whom Nebuchadnezzar was named after. There’s also an orchestra in attendance.

The king calls for his officials (v 2), and they come (v 3). He tells them to bow down on the signal (v 5), and they do (v 7). A crowd of “all ... nations” and “every language” fall on their faces and worship. Except for three...

Read Daniel 3:8-18

- ❓ *What might you want to reply to Nebuchadnezzar’s question in verse 15?*
- ❓ *What do you find most striking about their reply in verses 16-18?*

Apply

Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego lived in a culture that put them under pressure—and so do we.

- ❓ *What are the “gods” (values/ideas/things) that the people around you “worship” (pursue/esteem highly/demand that others respect)? Think about areas of life where...*
 - you get swept along with the crowd without noticing it.
 - your choices/views are questioned or “denounced” by others.

- you could be threatened with consequences for not conforming.

Take heart: Daniel was written to God’s people to help them to stay faithful. So here are three lessons to learn from these three believers.

1. Self-defence is not necessary (v 16). It’s good to answer questions thoughtfully, but ultimately no unbeliever stands in judgement over you—only God does. So there’s no need to panic. Our responses can be calm and measured.

2. God will deliver (v 17-18). No “hand” is too strong for God to rescue us from. However dire circumstances may look, he “is able” to act.

3. Trust and persist (v 18). These men trust God to work in the way he sees fit; they may be delivered from the grave, or delivered beyond the grave. Even when God’s ways seem strange to us, we must continue to say “no” to worshipping anything other than him.

- ❓ *Which of these three points do you find most helpful, and why?*

Pray

However many times we might fail him in the meantime, by grace and through faith we will one day be part of a crowd from every nation and language bowing down in worship to the one true God. Read Revelation 7:9-12 and start doing that now!



Turning up the heat

It's getting hot in here. But Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are keeping their clothes on...

Read Daniel 3:19-29

- ❓ *What details are we given to show that these three men are facing certain death (v 19, 20, 22, 23)?*

It looks as though Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are beyond hope. Surely there's no way out of this one. The way the story is told sets us up to share in Nebuchadnezzar's "amazement" in verse 24.

- ❓ *What three surprises are there in verse 25 (compare with v 24)?*
- ❓ *What details are we given to show how total God's deliverance of his servants is (v 27)?*
- ❓ *Who does Nebuchadnezzar give the credit to (v 28-29)? What's lacking in his response, do you think?*

Who is the fourth man in the fire? Some commentators think it is a "christophany"—an Old Testament appearance of Christ—others that it is an angel. Either way, this is clearly an ambassador from heaven sent by God. As such, it reminds us that God saves by coming close; by entering into our pain; and by experiencing the judgment we are facing. All these things we see in full in the incarnation, life and death of Christ.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego remained faithful under trial, and God brought them out of the furnace. Jesus remained faithful under trial and God raised him out of the tomb. And in him, we too will be brought through the fire of

judgment. And so we marvel along with Nebuchadnezzar—surely “no other god can save in this way” (v 29)!

Apply

Think about some of the hard situations you're facing—perhaps ones which feel beyond hope or of which there appears to be no way out.

- ❓ *What difference does it make to know that...*
- *Jesus is in the fire with you?*
 - *Christ's faithfulness means he can get you through death?*

Read 1 Peter 1:6-9. What else does God promise to be doing in the midst of your trials? How have you seen that to be true in your life previously? How does that encourage you for today?

Pray

*Fear not, I am with thee; oh be not dismayed
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee
to stand*

*Upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand
When through fiery trials thy pathways
shall lie*

*My grace all sufficient shall be thy supply
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.*

(From *How Firm a Foundation*)



Who holds the power?

When rapper Kanye West professed faith, he released an album entitled “Jesus is King”. But Daniel 4 tells the surprising conversion story of an even bigger star.

The chapter begins with a pronouncement in the voice of the king.

Axe man

Read Daniel 4:1-18

- ❓ *Think back over God’s dealings with Nebuchadnezzar so far, as well as 4:1-8. What has the king understood about God? What has he been slow to learn?*
- ❓ *The king dreams of an enormous, splendid tree. Compare verses 11-12 with 14-15a. Match each element of the tree’s description with what happens to it.*
- ❓ *In verse 18 Nebuchadnezzar asks Daniel to interpret the dream. But what hints have we already been given about:*
 - *what the dream represents (v 15b-16)?*
 - *what lesson God intends him to draw from it (v 17)?*

Ox man

Read Daniel 4:19-27

No wonder Daniel is afraid (v 19). Imagine what it would be like to deliver these words to the most powerful man in the ancient world: “Your Majesty, you are that tree!” (v 22). Soon Nebuchadnezzar will be cut down—he will lose his mind and his kingdom.

- ❓ *What is the big truth that the king must acknowledge (v 25, 26)?*
- ❓ *How should this play out in his actions (v 27)?*

To say that Nebuchadnezzar is “great and strong” (v 22) is almost an understatement. But there is a God in heaven who is greater and stronger. And God rules, not Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar is high, but he is not the Most High. No tree can withstand God’s axe when he chooses to wield it. So Nebuchadnezzar—and everyone else—is called to acknowledge that God is King, and live in obedience to his commands (v 27).

But will Babylon’s king heed Daniel’s warning? We’ll find that out tomorrow.

Apply

“The Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes” (v 17, v 25).

- ❓ *Imagine you were one of Daniel’s first readers, living in Israel after their return from exile and still living in its shadow. What about that statement both encourages you and challenges you?*
- ❓ *Think about yourself today. What about that statement both encourages you and challenges you?*
- ❓ *Who would you describe as the “great and strong” trees in your world? Think personally as well as nationally/globally. What does this passage teach us about the nature of human power?*
- ❓ *Whether you think of yourself as a towering tree or a shaky sapling, what would it look like to live in a way that acknowledges “that Heaven rules”?*